

## Book Reviews

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Walker, C. E., & Clarke, L. (2020). *Witness to the Age of Revolution: The Odyssey of Juan Bautista Túpac Amaru*. New York: Oxford University Press.

The first paragraph of the memoir that Juan Bautista Túpac Amaru wrote and published in Buenos Aires between 1824 and 1826 states that his decades of imprisonment and horror “would have remained unknown like so many others if it were not for the fact that humanity is causing monarchies to fall, and this has weakened the Spanish Crown.”<sup>1</sup> This quote reflects the framework of analysis that Charles Walker and Liz Clark decided to use to narrate and analyze the life of Juan Bautista Túpac Amaru: one that combines biography and world history. In this book, Juan Bautista is a man but also an era. He was a half-brother of José Gabriel Condorcanqui Túpac Amaru and participated in the famous rebellion (1780–1783), though without playing a leading role. This allowed Juan Bautista to miraculously survive when most of the Túpac Amaru family was executed by the Spanish repressors. However, until the end of his life, he asked himself whether it would not have been better to die along with his family since what he suffered after the insurrection was a martyrdom that lasted four decades.

These decades of suffering are at the heart of the story told by historian Charles Walker and illustrator Liz Clarke in their excellent book. It is divided into three sections. The first is a graphic history—like a comic book—of the odyssey of Juan Bautista; the second is an interpretative essay about this figure and his era; and the third provides many of the primary sources that are available to help us understand his life. This combination of contents makes the book an original, versatile contribution that will be accessible to a variety of audiences.

The most substantive and important section of the book is the graphic history.<sup>2</sup> It narrates a history that is as sad as it is surprising. Juan Bautista is detained in 1783 and sent with his wife, mother, and other relatives to Lima.

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1 Translation by *Apuntes*.

In this first period, he witnesses his mother die of thirst along with dozens of other prisoners. In Lima he is sentenced to imprisonment in Spain. The dreadful conditions experienced crossing the Atlantic continue to decimate the prisoners and Juan Bautista's wife, Susana Aguirre, dies during the journey and is thrown overboard. Arriving in Spain, he begins a spell of almost forty years in prisons in Cádiz and Ceuta. The account of the abuses and inhumanity he experienced during these decades is devastating. A turning point in the story comes with the arrival in Ceuta of Father Marcos Durán Martel, who had been imprisoned for participating in the uprisings against the Spanish authorities in Huánuco in 1812. From that moment on, the two men become inseparable. Thus begins a decade during which the two men ask over and over for an end to the detention of Juan Bautista Túpac Amaru. These petitions do not achieve their goal until 1822 when, by now in his 70s, Bautista and Durán Martel are finally allowed to board a ship bound for Buenos Aires. In that city, amid pro-independence fervor, they gain the support of Bernardino Rivadavia, which allows Bautista to write his memoirs, the testimony that forms the basis for the reconstruction of his life. Desperate to return to Peru, he sends a letter to Simón Bolívar in 1825, in which he begs the liberator to let him return to Peru and once again breathe the air of his homeland. However, he receives no reply and on September 2, 1827, Juan Bautista dies in Buenos Aires.

This trajectory is exceptional and moving in itself. But it becomes involved and cosmopolitan when it is situated and explained in the international context of the rebellions that rocked Europe and the Americas during these years. It is important to point out that the Túpac Amaru rebellion occurred only four years after the United States declared its independence, a decade before the French revolution, and more than twenty years before the Hidalgo and Morelos rebellion in Mexico and the Haitian revolution. This is important because of at least two issues that are duly underlined in the book. On the one hand, it is not surprising that the Túpac Amaru rebellion lacked comprehensive and definitive ideological underpinnings, since political modernity was just then appearing on the global horizon. On the other hand, all this political effervescence had a direct effect on the odyssey of Juan Bautista. The prospects of his being freed became real due to the Napoleonic invasion of the Iberian Peninsula and the founding of the Courts of Cádiz; the arrival of Durán Martel can only be explained by the rebellions in the Americas against Spanish domination; and his ultimate release and freedom in Argentina can only be explained through the triumphant independence movements in the Americas. Thus, we have a global, American, and local history. Of course, the framework of analyses

of “global” histories has boomed in recent years, and in this book its usage is particularly auspicious.<sup>2</sup>

The second merit of this graphic history is its emphasis on violence. When I noticed that the title of Juan Bautista’s memoirs was “Forty Years of Imprisonment,” I thought of Steve McQueen’s film “Twelve Years A Slave,” which illustrates uncompromisingly how the domination of the slave population in the southern United States was based on a crude violence. The martyrdom suffered by Juan Bautista from 1783 to 1822—forty years of constant brutality—is a fundamental part of the story. In this sense, the cruel domination of Juan Bautista’s body echoes three centuries of colonial oppression, as well as much of the treatment of the indigenous population after independence. At a time when the expression “symbolic violence” is freely used, it is worth looking directly at violence and confronting its primary dimensions, without appending adjectives.

Although I am not qualified to evaluate the graphic component of the book, I would like to raise three issues as a simple reader. First, the font used to narrate the history is too small; second, the drawings of the vignettes seems static to me, like a set of postcards that do not demonstrate the movement or action described in the narration; third, the illustrations do reflect the primary sources of the history very well.

With this publication, Charles Walker adds yet another accomplishment to his work—started three decades ago—on society, movements, and rebellions in southern Peru. This time he used the medium of a graphic novel, and successfully met the challenge. Now this book must make inroads with readers and hopefully—a translation is vital—introduce the biography of Juan Bautista Túpac Amaru to our canon of heroes, as well as incorporating this figure into an understanding of our complex national trajectory.

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2 For different approaches to global history see, for example: Beckert, S. (2014), *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*, New York: Vintage Books; Boucheron, P. (2017), *Histoire mondiale de la France*, Paris: French and European Publications Inc.; Tutino, J. (Ed.), (2016), *New Countries. Capitalism, Revolutions, and Nations in the Americas, 1750-1870*, Durham: Duke University Press.